No. 45

The
REDEMPTION
of
Marie Gordon
THE TRAGIC STORY OF
WRONGED WOMANHOOD
Price 10¢

"Oh, there is another, and I'll tell you if you really want to know," came back slowly. "I am leaving to avoid being ordered around by a woman of your type."

R. of M. C. No. 45.

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Chapter 145

"SHE WILL GO!"

SINCERE repentance is never brought about by a chain of circumstances which threaten the welfare of the offender. Taking this as a criterion, it may safely be said that the repentance Alice Gordon avowed in the letter to her father was anything but sincere.

She had suddenly come to realize that being a discarded wife had its disadvantages. Even those she still called "friends" had grown cool toward her.

She had come to realize also that a life of luxury and ease could only be purchased at a price she was not yet willing to pay.

Oh, yes, there were several men within the circle of her acquaintance who had offered to put her in a cozy little flat.

Not that Alilce stood high above such a thing. There is not the least doubt that she was ready to accept even that as a last resort.

When a woman grows desperate, she is apt to do desperate things. But at the present her two main deterrents were her pride and the consequences of such a step.

To become the acknowledged mistress of a man meant social ostracism and utter moral degradation. It would be the burning of the last bridge.

There is no telling what would have happened if Alice had not so unexpectedly found her young sister. It was easy for her to pull the wool over Betty's eyes.

She knew very well that her father would go to

any extreme to satisfy her demand if it meant the return of his favorite child.

Alice had calculated correctly. And after sending that letter to her father at Oak Manor, she waited patiently for a reply.

It came with unexpected promptness, but not from the source she anticipated. The moment she looked at the handwriting on the envelope she prepared herself for a shock.

With a disappointed look on her face and an angry light in her eyes, she read her husband's decree.

"I am willing to allow you to return to Oak Manor because my refusal to do so would probably cost your father his life," Philip Gordon wrote. "The conditions set forth in your letter will be complied with.

"But I want you to understand once and for all, that a reconciliation between us is absolutely out of the question. So don't try any of your old tricks on me this time. They won't work.

"You have gone too far in your determination to get even with me for fancied wrongs. The blame for all of our domestic difficulties must forever rest upon your shoulders. You had little right to become a wife, and absolutely none to aspire to become a mother.

"I have promised your father that I would come after you and Betty. Please avoid a scene by trying to be affectionate when we meet. I could not stand it. The length of your stay at Oak Manor will depend entirely upon your conduct."

Gordon closed the letter by saying that he would arrive in Chicago the following day. The expression on his wife's face was that of a fiend as she finished reading.

With a cry of rage she tore the sheet of paper into shreds and threw them on the floor.

"Oh, I might have expected it!" she hissed as she strode up and down the room like a caged lioness. "But he has no right to insult me. I would have been a better wife and a different mother if I had been treated as such.

"Well," she added with a strange smile. "I'll have to accept what my dear husband offers me. And I'll promise not to miss a chance to get even with him."

As soon as she had regained her composure she went upstairs where her younger sister had busied herself.

Betty was seated before the mirror of her dresser, trying to curl her hair. She did not seem to make much headway.

"Oh, I'll do that for you," Alice volunteered.

"Will you?" Betty smiled.

"Sure. And you'll say that I am quite a hairdresser when I am through."

Alice took a hold of the electric curling iron and went to work. It did not prove to be much of a task, however, because Betty's hair was naturally wavy.

When the job was nearly finished, Alice approached the subject uppermost in her mind.

"I have glorious news for you, Betty," she exclaimed, affecting great joy. "I just received a letter from Oak Manor. Dad wants us both to come there at once and he is sending my husband after us."

Betty's eyes filled with tears. For some moments she could not speak.

"Oh—I can't tell you how happy I am, Alice," she said at last.

"I am glad you are happy, dear," the older sister answered. "And now we'll make our plans. Come, sit down."

After they were both seated Alice relieved her

mind of the things that worried her. She asked Betty never to reveal the fact that she had been hiding in the tower at Oak Manor.

Betty promised.

"Another thing," Alice went on, "dad does not know anything about your trouble in Detroit. There is no need of mentioning it now. He is in feeble health and everything worries him so. The best thing for both of us to do is to bury the past. You agree with me, don't you, Betty?"

But Betty was so happy that she could not sleep.

She was of the type who easily forgive and forget. Her happiness at being reunited with her father and husband overshadowed everything else.

"I am leaving everything to you, sister," she said, her big eyes glowing with anticipation.

Until a late hour these two remained together. Alice did not overlook a single thing in her anxiety to ingratiate herself with Betty. She was kindness itself and at times almost loving.

"Now sleep good, dear," were her words as she kissed her younger sister good-night. "The first thing in the morning we'll get ready to leave."

But Betty was so happy that she could not sleep.

Until long after the midnight hour she lay awake. When at last she succumbed to the wooing of Morpheus she slept soundly.

The next day was one never to be forgotten for herself as well as Alice.

It was one of agonized waiting, for Philip Gordon did not arrive until about seven o'clock in the evening. Alice was alone in the living room when she heard the whirring of an automobile.

Something told her that it was Phil, and she ran to the front door to admit him.

She was so excited that she would have forgotten everything and thrown herself into his arms had he but given her the least encouragement.

But nothing of the kind happened. Gordon strode into the hall with a black frown upon his face.

"Hello, Phil," she said timidly, and held out her hand.

His eyes measured her coldly.

"None of that, please," he replied. "I have come for Betty and you. If you are ready we'll leave at once."

Alice fought back her anger, but she could not refrain from saying:

"That was an unnecessarily severe letter you wrote me, Phil. I admit I have been at fault, but you might have used a little kindness. You don't know how wretched I have been."

Again his cold eyes measured her.

"We usually get what we deserve in this world," he declared in an even tone. "If you have been wretched it is because you deserved to be so. You don't think for a moment that I have any pity for you after all you done?"

Alice retreated a step, her cheeks burning.

"If that is the way you feel," she answered in a trembling voice, "why did you come after us?"

"I came because it is the wish of your sick and perhaps dying father," Phil told her.

"My dying father?" Alice gasped. "I—I don't understand."

Gordon drew himself up as he retorted:

"Your father is deathly sick. Your letter to him has had a bad effect. He believes his end is near and in his agony he implored me to bring back his children. I could not refuse the old man's prayer.

"For his sake I have conquered my feeling toward

you and have, as he wished, come here myself, to lead you and your newly found sister to him."

In his agitation, his voice became more and more hoarse.

"I have promised your father to open the doors of my house to you again. Do not misunderstand me, please. I do not do so voluntarily, but only to grant what may be your father's last wish.

"I see through you and your hypocrisy fully, and if you ever believed that you have deceived me as you have your old father, I tell you now that you are greatly mistaken.

"I have no faith in your repentance—I know you are incapable of remorse. It is for some other reason that you have asked your father to meditate between me and you. What is this reason, answer me! Why have you left Wayne—or has he left you?"

The look of triumph which had flashed from Alice's eyes when he had said that his doors were again open to her, now faded away.

A smoldering fire shone in them instead, and with arms folded across her breast she retorted defiantly:

"What if I refuse to answer!"

"Then I can only think that my assumption that Wayne has preferred not to unite his future with yours is right," he rejoined contemptuously. "At all events the hopes which you had set on him have been dashed to pieces and there is nothing left for you to do but to seek refuge in my house again."

"You may think what you please for all I care," she laughed scornfully, "but—what is the meaning of all this long speech?"

Her scorn roused his anger and he called forth all his self-control to remain calm.

As quietly as he could he replied:

"With your sister, you will come with me to-night to Oak Manor, so that your father may have the satisfaction of again seeing you in my house. Before the world, you will seem to have your place in my house once more. In reality, you will be there on sufferance. Please, remember that.

"God alone knows how long I will be able to bear the torment of seeing you near me."

He wiped the perspiration from his brow. His face was ghastly—the eyes glowing with dull flame, retreated deep into their sockets—his cheeks were fallen in and grim despair hovered about his lips.

But Alice saw nothing, or would not see.

She would not admit that she was the cause of all his misery, that her outrageous frivolity alone had brought him to this state.

But one thought possessed her; she would and must attain her object.

"And—what about Miss Desmond, the governess—will she go?" she asked sharply.

Phil roused himself.

He suppressed an impulse to throw himself at this cold, haughty woman whose fetters bound him and who robbed him of all joy in life.

Wearily and breathing heavily, he answered:

"Yes, she will go."

"Ah," exclaimed Alice involuntarily betraying her satisfaction. "Does she know—have you told her?"

He shook his head.

"She will know soon enough."

Was the woman who stood before him a devil, that she could laugh like that? He turned his eyes from her. He felt instinctively that he would lose his self-command if he continued to look at her.

"Where is your sister?" he asked after a pause.

"Let her know at once and see that she makes herself ready. We must go without delay."

Alice's eyes sparkled.

She had not expected so quick and brilliant a victory—the governess routed, and she again mistress at Oak Manor! Oh, the sweet triumph that she was still to taste!

The governess did not yet know that she had to go. She, herself, would have the opportunity to tell her, and she would not lose a chance to crush the hated and despiced woman.

With a quick movement, she struck the hair back from her face and answered languidly:

"Betty is here; she is upstairs. I will call her."

She carried her head high as she left the room.

When she had gone, Gordon broke down into a chair. This was the bitterest hour of his life. He was bringing home the woman he hated and despised. But he had to swallow it.

Marie Desmond—how would she bear it?

She did not yet know what was before her.

What a terrible blow for her when she learned that she had to go without notice — that she would be discharged like a menial who had committed a fault.

Angrily, he clenched his hands. Oh, that he could go with her to protect and shield her with the love which she had kindled in his soul, and which he could not extinguish!

With a groan, he covered his face with his hands. A terrible future was before him—he was chained to a woman whom he abhorred.

But the prospect of actually being compelled to live again under the same roof with Alice was not the only thing that worried him at this time.

Every trace was being made by hired detectives to

find a trace of his first wife.

What if Marie, his first wife, was found and returned to him? What a frightful possibility! Gordon could not repress a groan as the thought came to him.

He was deeply and hopelessly in love with Marie Desmond, the governess of his children. Ah, what a horrible triangle!

And the strangest thing of it all was that he remained utterly blind to the fact that this Marie Desmond and his beloved first wife were one and the same person.

But for the present he chose to put all these ideas aside and meet the promblem confronting him now. The prospect of asking Miss Desmond to leave Oak Manor made his heart feel sick within him.

"Good God, I can't do it, and yet I must!" he groaned.

As he began pacing the floor he consulted his watch from time to time. Alice had been gone nearly thirty minutes now. What was keeping her?

The murmur of voices came from the floor above. Occasionally this was punctuated by a sharp command.

Then he heard what sounded very much like a woman sobbing. He fought an impulse to go upstairs and find out what the trouble was.

"I wonder what Alice is up to now?" he murmured. "I really would like to know how she came to find Betty so suddenly. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that there is some deviltry behind it."

He recalled Betty Procter as a sweet young girl, who had been her father's favorite.

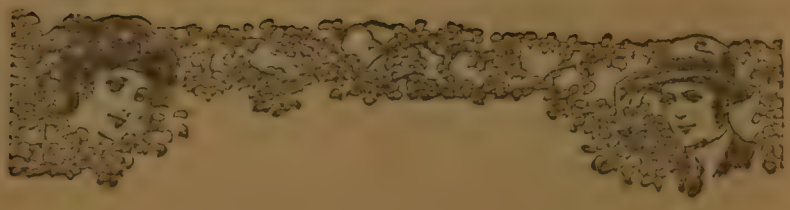
He knew little about her marriage to Bob Harding, the automobile mechanic. At least he would be instrumental in bringing these two together again and thus create happiness for the young couple.

Gordon's heart warmed a trifle. He had learned

to like Harding at their first meeting. Bob had shown the right stuff by refusing to live in idleness on his father-in-law's wealth. He had gone to work like a real man.

And before he knew it, Phil had reached for the telephone book lying on the table. It was his intention to call up the garage in which Bob Harding worked and tell him to start for Oak Manor at once. But to his disappointment he found that the telephone had been taken out.

He sat down and began another long wait.



Chapter 146

MURDER!

NVITATIONS were being sent out by Mrs. Crawford for a reception to be given in honor of her pretty young stepdaughter Lillian. All of their friends living on neighboring estates and farms were asked to come. But good care was taken that none of their city friends were included.

Hawkins had seen to that, for he dreaded another meeting with Allan Rushford whom he had left purposely behind on that yacht trip.

Of course, the young girl was being kept in ignorance of the fact that her engagement to Roger Hawkins was to be publicly announced on that occasion.

She looked forward to the reception with a great deal of pleasant anticipation because her stepmother had consented to invite Victor Talbot.

Hawkins had objected for a very good reason, but was overruled by Mrs. Crawford. Later when the subject again came up for discussion, she taunted him by saying:

"I believe you are afraid that Talbot might steal Lillian away from you at the eleventh hour."

"You are mistaken," Hawkins answered quickly. "I am not afraid of anything that man might attempt. You may rest assured that I'll beat him to it. There is no love lost between him and myself."

"Oh, I know that," responded the woman laughingly. "Just the same I suggest that you keep an eye on Talbot."

Hawkins promised that he would, and that ended

it.

On the evening of the reception the guests began to arrive at an early hour.

They were met at the door by the hostess and her lovely young stepdaughter. Victor Talbot did not make his appearance until nearly nine o'clock.

Mrs. Crawford received him with her usual effusiveness, but he promptly mingled with the others the moment the woman showed an inclination to own him for the night.

There was plenty of music and some dancing. Lillian could not refuse to dance with Hawkins when he asked her.

Talbot's features were blalck with wrath when he saw the girl he loved so dearly in another's arms. It brightened up quickly afterward when she came to him with one of her beguiling smiles.

"I know you did not want me to dance with him, dear," she whispered as she touched his arm gently. "But you must not feel jealous. Mr. Hawkins is our guest, you know."

"Yes, I know that," Victor growled. "But it makes my blood boil to see that fellow hold you so tight."

The incident was soon forgotten in the whirl of the next hour.

Talbot was not a good dancer, and he went on the floor with Lillian because he could not bear to have other men constantly paw over her.

The clock had just struck eleven when lunch was being served in the big dining room. The guests were being seated by the hostess.

Much to Talbot's chagrin he found himself at the far end of the table with some people he scarcely knew, while Roger Hawkins received the place of honor beside Lillian Crawford at the head.

The look of triumph on the man's face made Talbot want to commit murder right then and there.

The young girl did not seem very happy. There was a constant quivering about her lips, and her eyes sought those of her lover in mute supplication.

As a sudden silence fell upon the assembly the air seemed charged with electricity. Everyone present gazed at the head of the table where Mrs. Crawford rose slowly from her seat.

"My dear friends," she began, gazing around with a smile, "I have quite a surprise for you. All of you knew that this little party was given in honor of my daughter. But that is not the most important part. I asked you to come mainly to hear an announcement.

"Mr. Roger Hawkins, a very estimable young man from the city, has asked for the hand of my daughter Lillian in marriage, and he has been accepted. I am very happy to be able to make the announcement of their betrothal at this time."

Lillian sprang to her feet white as a sheet.

She shot a swift glance in the direction where Victor Talbot sat with his head bowed. Her very heart and soul went out to him.

"I must correct what my mother was pleased to announce," she said in the deathlike silence which continued. "I was not consulted at all about this announcement. Mr. Roger Hawkins may be all that has been claimed for him, but there could not be an engagement between us.

"I am already the promised wife of another. The man to whom I will give my hand in marriage is Mr. Victor Talbot, whom most of you know and respect. And I shall marry him because I love him, and for no other reason."

Mrs. Crawford's eyes flashed fire. She could

hardly wait until the girl finished speaking.

"Since my daughter is still under age I am the one who has a right to decide whom she shall marry," she shrieked.

"That is true," Hawkins seconded as he stood up boldly. "Miss Lillian Crawford will become my wife within a week. This matter was definitely settled when she accompanied me on a yacht trip."

Talbot was watching the proceedings like a man in a trance.

Perhaps he would have held himself under control if his rival had refrained from mentioning the yacht trip.

But what really aroused the fighting blood within him was the sight of Hawkins deliberately taking the girl he loved in his arms and attempt to kiss her as a seal of their bethrotal.

And then the sound of Lillian sobbing made him forget what he owed the hostess. With a low cry of rage he raced around the table and snatched the girl away from the other.

"Touch her again, and I'll kill you!" he hissed, absolutely beside himself. "Do you want me to tell these people here what kind of a skunk you are?"

Hawkins, wild with anger, lashed out and struck Talbot a terrible blow in the face.

For a moment it seemed that these two would fight it out right then and there, but cooler heads prevailed and the trouble came to an end.

"I'll get you for this, if it is the last thing I do on earth!" was Talbot's parting shot as he was being led away.

The guests, appalled at what they had heard and witnessed, quietly began to leave. Mrs. Crawford, mortified beyond words, could do nothing to prevent it.

Finally she burst into tears and went upstairs to

vent her wrath upon her stepdaughter's head.

Hawkins, with plain murder in his eyes, stalked from the room and ordered his horse saddled. There was no one near to see him dash away at top speed.

It was his purpose mainly to cool his fierce anger, but nothing could have suited him better than to encounter Victor Talbot.

Along the lonely country road he rode without looking to the right or left.

Directly ahead of him was a strip of woodland, where he dismounted for no particular reason. He lit a cigarette and fell to brooding.

Yes, he had been a fool by allowing himself to fall in love with a girl who actually hated him. And to-night's affair had capped the climax. He was utterly disgusted.

As he stood there leaning against the grazing horse, he imagined he saw the underbrush to his right stir slightly.

Owing to an overclouded sky it was so dark that it was impossible to see any distance.

Hawkins suddenly saw the folly of venturing out alone at this hour. Even if he should happen to meet Talbot, he was decidedly at a disadvantage.

His enemy could attack him before he fully became aware of his presence. Mounting his horse he trotted homeward.

Somehow he felt relieved when the Crawford home loomed up before him. He was just passing the gate which led to the Talbot estate when he saw something moving along the roadside.

Instant fear clutched at his heart and he gave the horse a smart blow with the whip.

But before he could get out of the zone of danger there was a quick flash and the crack of a gun. Hawkins felt a stinging pain in his left breast.

"My God, he's got me!" he groaned as he toppled from his mount.

As he struck the ground, he made a futile attempt to regain his feet. The pain in his side was excruciating. Then, all of a sudden, numbness overcame him.

"God, I am done for!" he gasped, as a thin stream of blood oozed from his mouth.

For a few moments his body quivered, then lay still.

Chapter 147

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.

MORNING dawned in its usual natural splendor. One after another the servants in the Crawford home arose and yawningly prepared for the duties of the day. The had a good deal to talk about this morning, for most of them had witnessed the violent scene in the big dining room that night.

Jim, the stable boss, was last to appear for work. He was very much surprised to hear the neighing of a horse as he approached the stable.

The riderless horse he saw he recognized at once as being the one Roger Hawkins had ordered to be saddled the previous evening.

"Oh, Pete," he called to his assistant who was busy within the stable. "Come out here."

Pete was on the spot quickly.

"What's up, Jim?" he inquired, looking at the horse the latter was holding.

"That's what I want to find out," Jim retorted. "I saddled this bay for Mr. Hawkins last night, and now I find him running around here without his master. And there is blood on his right flank. We better find out about this."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Pete, paling a trifle. "I hope nothing happened to Mr. Hawkins."

"Put the bay in his stall and then we'll look around," the other retorted. "I have an idea that we are in for a surprise."

A minute later both of these men walked down toward the gate and along the road. It was Jim who first

discovered Hawkins lying in the ditch. With a cry of alarm he ran forward.

"Good God!" he gasped. "Look at this, Pete. Somebody shot Mr. Hawkins, and I believe he is dead."

A quick examination revealed that the man was apparently stone dead. The bullet had passed through his breast, coming out right below the shoulder blade.

"What are we going to do?" Pete asked, helplessly.

"Lete's carry him to the house," Jim replied. "We must get a doctor at once. It might be possible that something still may be done for him."

Hawkins was carried to the Crawford home, where Jim took command of the situation since the mistress of the house was still asleep.

He ordered the servants to remain quiet, then called up the nearest physician and asked him to come without delay.

While this was beieng done, one of the farmhands came in carrying a rifle. He reported that he had found it lying in a clump of weeds by the roadside.

The minute Jim saw the gun, he emitted a low whistle.

"I bet Mr. Hawkins was shot with this gun," he remarked. "It will help find the murderer. The man who did the shooting must have been crazy to throw it into the weeds."

In the meantime one of the maids, eager to break the news to her mistress had gone to Mrs. Crawford's room.

"What is it, Amanda?" the latter asked sleepily as the girl entered.

"Something terrible has happened," said the girl tremblingly.

Mrs. Crawford sat up in bed with a start.

"What's happened?" she cried, pale with alarm. "Is it — it Miss Lillian?"

"No, Miss Lillian is still asleep. They brought in Mr. Hawkins and they say he is dead."

"Dead?"

The girl nodded.

With a bound Mrs. Crawford was out of bed. She dressed with nervous haste and in complete silence. In the hall downstairs she met the stable boss, who at once informed her of what had happened.

"Why, this is dreadful," she gasped, walking toward the living room with the man.

"Yes, it is dreadful," the man agreed. "I am afraid Mr. Hawkins is dead."

She sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands. Her first thoughts were of herself.

How could she explain the crime? And what could she say to the police when the dead man was found in her house? But that was not all by any means. If Hawkins was really dead how could she get along without him?

Mrs. Crawford showed no emotion other than self-pity. She gave an involuntary shudder as she asked:

"Have you any idea as to who did the shooting?"

"I have not," the man returned. "So far as I know Mr .Hawkins had no enemy around here. However, the gun has been found, and most likely the police will find a clue by tracing its ownership."

The woman gave a sudden start as an idea came to her.

Its frightful significance almost made her heart stop beating. But no—no, such a thing could not be. Victor Talbot was not the man to commit a cold-blooded murder. She rose hastily from her chair.

"Jim," she said in a voice that sounded strange to

her own ears, "I want you to take charge of the situation. Send for a doctor and——"

"I already telephoned for one," the stable boss interrupted.

"Then inform the police, Jim, and explain everything to them when they come. If they ask for me, just say that I am ill and can not be interviewed. I am so terribly excited I could not bear to talk to anyone. No matter what happens, I must not be disturbed."

"Very well, Mrs. Crawford," the man nodded. "Do you want to see the body? We carried it into the library and placed it on the couch."

The woman made a quick gesture of abhorrence.

"No—no!" she cried. "I can not bear to look at a dead man."

As fast as her feet could carry her she ran back upstairs and locked herself in her boudoir.

Here she sank on the edge of the bed and began to ponder. With her mind's eyes she saw again the events of the night before.

Ah, what a frightful mistake she had made.

"Men are such fools," she muttered, her lips compressed. "Here I am ready to sacrifice everything I hold dear to win Victor Talbot, and he falls for a mere slip of a girl like Lillian. But I won't give him up.

"I won't," she added passionately. "She shall not have him so long as I am able to prevent their marriage. I love him with all my heart and soul, and I feel I can't live without him."

Again she quailed in anguish of jealousy at the memory of the loving glances exchanged the night before by her stepdaughter and Talbot.

She could not forget that Lillian was now aware of the motive which animated her to announce her engagement to Hawkins.

And now Hawkins was dead. Lillian would be shocked, but she would also experience a sense of relief and triumph because of this unwelcome lover's removal.

Mrs. Crawford ground her teeth.

All her cunningly devised plans had gone amiss, and nothing hurt her worse than the thought that her stepdaughter had a chance to gloat in final victory.

But these thoughts were quickly replaced by others of equal importance. She had been close enough to hear every word when Victor Talbot, after having been struck by Hawkins, said:

"I'll get even with you for this if it is the last thing I do on earth."

It was a dangerous threat.

And now Hawkins had been found shot to death. Mrs. Crawford's agitation increased every moment as a new idea suggested itself to her.

There would be a sudden end to the relations between Lillian and Talbot if the latter was accused of the murder.

Her eyes flashed with vengeful fire. If she could not possess Victor, Lillian, too, must lose him. Her face wore an almost fiendish expression as she left her boudoir to see her stepdaughter.

In the hall she met the young girl's maid.

"Is Miss Lillian up?" she inquired.

"Yes," came back. "She is dressing, Mrs. Crawford."

The latter knocked lightly on the door and then entered.

Lillian was standing before the dresser putting the last touches on her luxurious hair.

The wonderful beauty of the young girl gave her stepmother a jealous pang.

She was as fresh as a budding rose. Her com-

plexion was without a flaw, and her eyes were big and innocent. Her figure, in spite of her youth was almost perfect. Lillian was the type of a girl men easily fall in love with.

Mrs. Crawford, as she studied her stepdaughter for a moment, was taunted anew with jealousy and hatred.

With ruthless brevity the older woman broke the news.

"Roger Hawkins was killed last night," she said, her voice pitched unnaturally high. "Somebody shot him to death."

The girl turned white and began to tremble in every limb.

"Shot—killed?" she gasped, her eyes widening with horror.

"Yes, he was murdered," Mrs. Crawford added without the least feeling. "I suppose you'll feel quite happy about it, for it leaves the field clear for Victor Talbot."

"Oh, mother, how can you talk like that?" the girl reproached, tears gathering at her long lashes.

"They found a gun near the scene of the murder," the other went on, looking steadily at Lillian. "It should not be a hard matter to trace its owner. You know what happened last night, don't you? You heard Talbot threaten Hawkins."

The young girl whirled upon the speaker.

"What do you mean, mother?" she panted.

"Just what I said, my dear. When one man threatens to get even with another he usually carries out that threat. I am frank to confess that I would not like to be in Talbot's shoes right now."

Lillian suppressed a scream. Her gentle expression changed into one of hot indignation.

"Do you mean to insinuate that Victor shot Hawkins?" she demanded, trembling like a leaf. "Do you really believe that he was capable of deliberate murder?"

Mrs. Crawford shrugged her ample shoulders.

"I am not making any positive statements in the case," she said realizing that she was going to far. "I am not saying anything that could be construed as an accusation. However, I have my own opinions. I suppose we shall hear soon enough what the police will say.

"Whether Victor Talbot did the shooting or not, he is bound to be suspected after what happened last night. One thing is sure. The fact that Talbot threatened Hawkins with bodily violence within the hearing of others, will be taken into account."

"This is terrible," faltered Lillian, while a deluge of tears welled from her eyes. "No, mother, no, it cannot be—all the world knows that Victor Talbot is an honorable, high-minded man. No one could accuse him of such baseness. Oh, God, my heart would break if this should happen!"

Suddenly she collected herself. Great anxiety and new resolution spoke from her features.

"I must go to him and inform him of what has happened before he hears it from others. I will tell him how firmly I believe in him. If the whole world is against him, I will be true to him—I know he is innocent!"

She made for the door, but felt herself held back by the arm.

"Have you lost your senses, Lillian?" cried Mrs. Crawford in cutting tones. "In no case must you leave the house—I forbid you. What nonsense! How can you think of going to his house? Do you wish people to point at you in the streets of the village?"

The words were not without their effect. Her stepmother's opposition drove Lillian to the verge of des-

peration.

"Let me go—let me go," she exclaimed. "I must go to him. I must go to him. I don't care what the world will say!"

Again she made for the door. Mrs. Crawford's face drew together in lines of uncontrollable anger.

"I tell you, you will stay! I will see whether I have not the power to make you obey!" she cried.

Before Lillian could suspect her object, Mrs. Crawford had pushed her back and left the room, closing the door behind her. The next moment, Lillian heard the key turning in the lock.

"Imprisoned!" cried the poor girl hopelessly. "Oh, what shall I do? When he learns what has happened and that he is suspected, there will be no one to encourage him—no one to comfort him. Oh, Victor, Victor—how will you bear it?"

Sobbing, Lillian sank into a chair and centered her thoughts on how to escape and reach Talbot. But hour after hour passed and she could see no way out.

Noon came, and a servant brought her luncheon into the room, but did not fail to lock the door when she left. In vain Lillian tried persuasion on the girl to let her out.

"I would do it gladly, but I cannot, Miss Lillian," she apologized. "Mrs. Crawford has threatened to discharge me at once if you leave your room. I have my old mother to support and cannot easily get another position as good as this."

The girl remained immovable to all coaxing and promises. Mrs. Crawford had evidently secured her allegiance.

Lillian could not touch a morsel of food. Her thoughts were incessantly occupied with her love.

No suspicion could rest on Victor, for he had

left the house long before Mr. Hawkins; and if even perchance they met on the way, how could he have shot him? He certainly had no gun when he left.

No, no! Her worry for him was absurd. He could be in no danger.

Her mother had merely followed her natural instinct to cause her pain and anxiety. She would naturally use any means to torment and hurt her.

Victor was in no danger, she consoled herself. The authorities would doubtless clear the matter up in a short order and any suspicion against Talbot, if indeed any existed in the mind of anyone, would soon be dissipated.

Comforting herself in this manner, the poor girl had no suspicion that dark clouds were hovering thicker and thicker over her beloved.

Chapter 148

BETTY'S RETURN.

WHEN ALICE GORDON used her younger sister as the means to become reestablished as the mistress of Oak Manor, she did so with the clear knowledge that a reconciliation between her husband and herself had become a thing no longer within the realm of possibility.

But that did not matter very much. What if he did dislike or even despise her so long as the world still believed her to be his wife.

It was really a master stroke on the part of this woman, who had nearly succeeded in going to the gutter completely.

It was all the more remarkable because of the fact that the very person she had tried to destroy became the chief factor.

There can not be the least doubt that Alice deliberately intended to have her sister Betty put out of the way. And now this same Betty, big of soul and so ever ready to forgive, seemed glad to bury the past.

She actually believed that Alice had been instrumental in softening her father toward her.

That she was imprisoned in the tower for such a long time at Oak Manor she had always regarded as a dire necessity.

For she was in constant dread that the police would rearrest her on sight for the murder of the Detroit artist.

Poor Betty did not have the least suspicion that she had been basely deceived by her older sister.

Not for a moment did she suspect that Alice had always stood between her and her father, and that this same Alice had been ready to sanction murder so that she might inherit the entire Procter estate.

It might be regarded indeed as a strange trick of fate that this selfish, heartless woman should regain the position she once held at Oak Manor through the very one she tried to keep away through base trickery.

But Alice was conscious that danger lurked for her in the return of Betty.

She was anxious to make sure that the past must never be referred to by her younger sister.

And for that reason she made it very emphatic to Betty that she should remain silent in case this question came up for discussion.

"Let me do the talking, dear," was the last thing she said to Betty as they prepared to leave for Oak Manor with Philip Gordon. "You see, I don't want father to know that I have been hiding you."

Betty, of course, promised, although she was rather puzzled at her older sister's vehemence as she spoke these words.

Philip Gordon rose hastily as the two women entered. He could scarcely believe his eyes when they fell upon Betty.

She was no longer the slip of a girl he had once known. She was a woman in every sense of the word. Her face, still beautiful, showed traces of much suffering and pain.

There were lines about her delicate mouth that could never be erased.

He did not give his wife a single glance, but moved forward to meet her younger sister.

"How are you, Betty?" he exclaimed pleasantly. "It is indeed a surprise to see you again. By jove, how

you have changed," he went on as he took her small hands in his. "And for the better, of course."

She tried bravely to smile.

"You always were such a flatterer, Mr. Gordon," she told him. "Well, I'll return the compliment. I think you are looking far more handsome than——"

Gordon's lips were drooping at the corners as he interrupted:

"Please don't tell me that. No man can go through the living hell I did without bearing marks of suffering. And I am told you also had your trials. Well, I am happy for your sake, Betty. There are better days in store for you now.

"Your old dad and your splendid husband have been searching for you the world over. What a joyous reunion there will be now. I am really very happy for your sake, Betty."

Alice had been listening to this exchange of words with an angry look on her face.

It almost killed her to be so studiously ignored by her husband. He might at least be civil.

Betty's mind had begun to digest Gordon's last remarks.

How could her father and Bob Harding have been searching for her when she was so close to them most of the time?

She shot a questioning glance at her sister. The latter gave a mute sign of warning.

"Be careful," her flashing eyes seemed to say.

"Yes," Betty murmured somewhat confused, "it will be a joyous reunion. I can hardly wait until I see dad and my husband again. But what pleases me most is that Bob has at last been accepted as a member of the family."

"Bob Harding is a fine fellow, and I am proud to

call him my brother-in-law," responded Gordon quickly. "You know it isn't wealth alone that makes the man. Character is what counts."

Alice caught the swift glance her husband shot her, and she averted her face.

She breathed a sigh of relief when he suggested that they start for Oak Manor without further delay. They went down to the waiting limousine. Phil assisted Betty into the vehicle very gently, but scarcely touched his wife's arm.

Instead of seating himself beside her, he chose to sit with Betty. At a sign from Gordon, the chauffeur started the car and they were off toward home at a rapid pace.

Betty had grown chatty, and she constantly plied Phil with questions about her father and her young husband.

Phil told her everything she wanted to know but grew silent when she inquired about his own welfare and that of his immediate family.

He took great pains not to look at his wife. Not a single word did he address to her. This seemed very strange to Betty, and she could not help but suspect that everything was not as it should be between her sister and Phil.

Alice seemed quite content to be left out of the conversation. In fact she heard little what was said.

She was thinking what a different place her home would be without the presence of Marie Desmond, the governess. Her hatred for this woman increased as they drew nearer and nearer Oak Manor.

The first thing she looked for as the car wended its way through the winding drive, was a light in the room occupied by Marie Desmond. Yes, there was a light, and her lips tightened.

Well, it did not matter very much whether the governess had already left or not. What if she remained another day or two?

Alice felt she could afford to be magnanimous now. As the limousine drew up at the main entrance, her husband jumped out and helped Betty alight.

He deliberately ignored Alice as she struggled to the ground. But when he essayed to enter the house with Betty on his arm, she intervened.

"I'll take care of my sister," she told him, her voice hard as steel.

"Very well," Phil acquiesced as he withdrew.

When they entered the sick-room, Dr. Van Buren rose from a chair at Mr. Procter's bed-side, so that he should not disturb the meeting between the old man and his daughters.

With a soft cry, Betty ran to her father who had risen in his bed and held his arms open to her.

"Betty—my dear, dear girl. At last I have you again!" They held each other in loving embrace; not a word was spoken.

Quietly Phil turned away for his eyes were moist. Dr. Van Buren was no less moved. Only Alice's cold, immovable face showed no sign of feeling.

"Father," breathed Betty, at last releasing herself from his embrace, "oh tell me I am forgiven—that you have taken me back into your heart and home—that I am once more your child!"

Sadly the old man looked into his daughter's worn face which told him a story of terrible suffering.

"My dear Betty," he cried, "is it really necessary for me to say that I have long since forgotten my anger —that I have been longing for you and have done everything to find you?"

Continued in next number

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